

## The Kobold Thieves: Chapter 01

By: Indigo Rho

A red fox sighed in exasperation and let his head fall forwards onto the thick tome opened before him. The impact jiggled his plump belly some. “Gods, this sucks,” he grumbled. “We’re the only ones not at the solstice festival.”

“That’s not true,” a reddish-brown lion chimed in. “I’m sure plenty of our peers have flooded into taverns off campus and are guzzling ale as we speak.”

“If we’d done less talking and more studying, then we’d be with them,” a lanky rabbit said. His frustration echoed between the towering bookshelves of the Academy of Zenith Mount’s library. Normally, students and staff would fill the building, all pouring through the wealth of arcane and mundane knowledge held within.

“Missing *one* day of work won’t hurt us,” the fox insisted.

“We’ve missed way more than one, which is why we’re here,” the rabbit countered. “We haven’t even picked a hex to research yet.”

“Because you keep rejecting every hex we suggest.”

“You haven’t brought up any specific ones at all, just vague descriptions that prove you don’t care about them to begin with.” The rabbit crossed his arms and glared at the fox, who finally lifted his head off the tome. ““What about that fountain that makes people have the weird dreams”” he said, imitating the fox’s voice. “It’s not a fountain, it’s the Spring of Carcosa, and it makes people see a shell with an unblinking eye rising out of a lake. Also, a lot of screaming is involved. If you’d bothered looking into it, you’d know there are only three texts here that mention it, and one is a rambling treatise claiming the cursed water causes premonitions, not hallucinations.”

The fox groaned and rolled his eyes.

“We could research Karth’s Curse.” The lion nudged his tome aside and grinned. “A whole city cursed to grow big and fat, all because they pissed off a dragon.”

The rabbit scoffed. “There’s even less material on that. And it’s ridiculous. Who wants to learn about a curse that makes you gain weight?”

“I think it’s more interesting than all the gloomy ones that give you

bad luck or make you ill,” the lion said with a shrug. “And I swore I saw something related to it here in the library when I was wandering around earlier.”

“What about that cursed cider that made people drunk for months?” the fox suggested.

The rabbit opened his mouth for a retort, but then thought better of it. “That might actually work. It’s well documented, not dreary, and simple enough to base a report around.” His ears twitched at the sound of something smacking against wood. He looked towards the source of the sound, but saw nothing. “Did any of you hear that?”

The fox and lion shook their heads. Something in the opposite direction creaked loudly, and they all turned to investigate.

Back where the rabbit had initially looked, quiet footsteps led around a bookshelf. The air shimmered, revealing a purple, serpentine kobold. Virk held his whip-like tail close to his body so it wouldn’t accidentally smack into anything else. Not that the students would’ve been able to see through the illusion spell that made him practically invisible. After all, they’d immediately fallen for the phantom noise he’d projected as a distraction. Often, the simplest illusions were the most effective. And the easiest to fall for.

Virk kept to the shadows and remained light on his feet as he navigated the library’s maze of aisles. At a small storeroom, he tapped the door twice, and then slipped inside.

The three other kobolds in Virk’s little gang of thieves quieted down and turned to greet him. There was Buckle, a dark green kobold with a wide grin and a wider gut. His tunic hung awkwardly on him, tight around his perfectly round middle but loose elsewhere. Pouches full of ingredients hung from his belt, pressed against the curve of his middle; the tools of his trade, both as a chef and a culinary mage.

Krix sat on a high shelf, beaming with his toothy smile that Virk always found a bit too smug. He resembled a miniature gator, though his scales were a dull orange rather than green or brown. Despite Virk reminding him over and over again to dress discreetly while on a job, Krix had kept in his silver nose ring, along with two other rings on his fingers. At the very least, he’d worn one of his few berets that lacked a gaudy feather.

The last of the gang, Cleave, leaned against the wall. He was the most

draconic of the four, with distant eastern dragon heritage. His scales were dark red and his long mane silver. He was fit and muscular, eschewing a shirt so he could keep his athleticism on display. He bore a scowl rather than a smile, typical of the irritable kobold.

“Alright,” Virk spoke up. “I’ve finished scouting. The only people aside from us in the entire library are three students and a librarian. The librarian is sleeping in an office on the far side of the building, so we shouldn’t have to deal with him. The students won’t be an issue, either.”

“Good, let’s knock them out and be done with it,” Cleave said. He pushed away from the wall and rolled his shoulders, showing off to no one who cared.

“And then there’ll be three witnesses and the Academy will know a break-in occurred,” Virk said with a sigh. He never expected much from Cleave, but the brute’s idiocy could still surprise him on occasion.

“Then I’ll hit them *extra* hard,” Cleave smirked.

Virk knew Cleave was mocking him and not being serious. “Even you can’t club someone with that degree of precision, Cleave. And murder will lead to the sort of attention we don’t want. If we do this the right way—*my* way—then the Academy will never even realize they’ve been burgled.”

“I don’t burgle, I steal,” Cleave grunted.

“They’re the same thing.”

“Yeah, but one sounds dumber than the other. We *take*, we *rob*, we *steal*; we don’t tip-toe around *burgling* people like a character in a puppet show.” Cleave straightened up, but Virk didn’t cower before the extra inch in height that gave him.

“It *is* a bit of a silly word,” Krix joined in. “Not exactly romantic.”

“Fine, we’re *stealing*,” Virk hissed. He refused to waste time arguing semantics.

Knowing when a fight wasn’t worth it was one of the many reasons he led the gang. The others were disasters in the making on their own. Cleave relied too much on brute force and lacked the patience and intelligence to plan anything out. If not for Virk, he’d be rotting in a dungeon somewhere, probably worse. Krix was a skilled pickpocket and smooth talker, but didn’t know when to quit and constantly got in over his head without guidance. He, too, would end up in chains if left to his own devices. Buckle hadn’t

known a thing about theft before Virk had recruited him, so he'd still be making a pittance as a cook if not in the gang. Virk was also certain he'd be about twice as wide. Heists were the only exercise the stout kobold got.

"Now, since the library isn't as empty as we'd hoped, we'll be switching to the backup plan I came up with." Virk had assumed a student or two might be there, but not a study group and not so close to their prize. Of course, he'd created contingencies to account for extraordinary circumstances. The key to any good heist was a good plan. "Buckle, you'll be creating the distraction that'll handle the students. I trust you can cook something up that'll be mistaken for a prank gone wrong. If we're lucky, it'll be months, perhaps even years before they realize a few valuable tomes are missing."

Buckle bounced in place, and his belly along with him. "Yes! I've prepared a recipe so outstanding that a few dusty books will be the last thing on anyone's mind."

Virk nodded at him. "Krix. Cleave. You two follow along until the students are out of the way. You'll get your orders then." Cleave grunted while Krix bowed.

With the plan in motion, Virk snapped his fingers. The air around them shimmered, hiding them in the same invisibility spell he'd been using to sneak through the library. Virk led them out of the room and to the study group. The group had done little in his absence. He tapped Buckle on the shoulder and gave him the okay to act.

Buckle pulled a tiny glob of fresh dough from one of the pouches on his belt. From another, he retrieved a pinch of flour, which he sprinkled on the dough. He flicked the ball out into the open. It bounced a couple of times on the stone floor before rolling under the table the students were sitting at, unnoticed.

The moment the dough ball came to a stop, it began to swell. The dough rose as if in an oven, growing from a couple of inches in size to nearly a foot in a matter of seconds. Then it stretched out, transforming from a sphere to an ovoid. Details formed on the strange creation of dough—eyes and a mouth on a serpentine head. The dough serpent's head split into two, then three, turning it into a hydra. Swirling patterns of frosting spread over its body while delicious cream filled its insides.

A sudden growth spurt hit the pastry hydra, flipping the table over. The students stumbled from their chairs in shock.

“Treat them to a feast, big guy,” Buckle whispered in delight. With a flick of his wrist, the living pastry obeyed his command.

The hydra flung itself at the fox and lion, who were beside each other. Neither had a chance to react before the hydra coiled around them, pinning them belly to belly. The aroma of fresh pastries filled their nostrils. When they struggled, elbows and hips pushed against soft dough that refused to let them go.

One head loomed over the fox, and another the lion. They struck simultaneously, forcing their way into the maws of their targets. The fox and the lion’s cheeks ballooned out, followed shortly by their middles. Their shirts grew painfully tight in seconds and tore down the seams. The fox’s gut swelled into the lion’s, which then pushed right back. Their eyes bulged as much as their bellies, both unable to believe they were being stuffed by a giant pastry.

The hydra steadily shrunk as it emptied itself into the pair. Two heads had essentially turned into feeding tubes, packing the fox and lion full of dough, frosting, and cream. The helpless students were squeezed between pastry and belly. They kicked and squirmed as they were fed, but never came close to escaping. Eventually, the heads withered away completely and the hydra loosened its grip. The fox and lion fell to the ground, buried beneath the wobbling domes of their bellies. They belched and groaned, already falling into deep food comas.

The rabbit had remained frozen in place as his peers were stuffed silly. He couldn’t take his eyes off their bloated middles, rising like twin furry hills. The hydra—reduced to a single head and now a snake—turned toward him.

“Shit shit shit!” the rabbit cried, and bolted away.

“Stop him!” Virk demanded.

“Don’t worry, I’d never let someone leave hungry,” Buckle giggled.

The pastry serpent raced after the rabbit with frightening haste. It darted ahead and the rabbit plowed right into it, bouncing off and into a coiling embrace. His ears flattened as he saw the enormous pastry eye him up, knowing he’d soon be as full as his peers. He only managed a whimper before the serpent lunged and he started puffing up like a balloon. The

serpent rapidly deflated, then vanished entirely into the rabbit's mouth, leaving not a crumb or speck of frosting behind. The rabbit lay on his back, staring at the ceiling, his view mostly blocked by the towering mountain of his belly.

Strained burps broke the silence of the library, but they carried far less than shouts. The kobolds came out of hiding.

"I miss when we actually used to fight people, not feed them," Cleave complained. "This is humiliating."

"It's only humiliating for the ones who got stuffed," Virk said. He agreed the method was ridiculous, but he couldn't argue with the results. All three students taken care of, seemingly the victims of a childish prank. If anyone else happened to enter the library, they'd be too distracted by the stuffed students to check for intruders.

"I really hope they liked the taste of the hydra. I've been perfecting it for months to be my most delicious creation yet!" Buckle said.

"If they weren't all about to pop, I'm sure they'd be praising your fattening masterpiece," Krix snickered.

Virk approached the fox and lion. Their bellies rose above his head, large enough to engulf him if they rolled over. He pressed a claw against the fox's middle and felt it sink in a couple of inches. The fox twitched a little, but showed no other awareness of his surroundings. The lion reacted even less, completely overwhelmed by the food coma. A short distance away, the rabbit stirred, dipping in and out of consciousness. He'd ballooned larger than either of his companions. His gut pushed against a bookcase and his head had nearly been buried beneath its mass. Soon he too passed out.

When the trio woke up, they'd find themselves in unfamiliar bodies, forced to adjust to fatter lives. Considerably fatter lives, if Buckle's cooking was anything to go by. A satisfied smile spread across Virk's face. He preferred to remain professional in the field, but knowing he'd been able to unleash drastic changes upon the students on a whim pleased him.

Virk returned to the group. "Krix, you'll help me grab the tomes we're after. Buckle. Cleave. Keep an eye on our engorged friends. If anyone else shows up, leave them alone and come to us immediately."

"Why do I have to guard the fatties?" Cleave growled.

"It's either that or searching for tomes."

Cleave frowned and turned away in a huff. “Fine, whatever.”

Virk hurried off to the section he knew the tomes would be in, with Krix right on his heels.

“So, are these books really going to be worth a fortune?” Krix asked.

“That’s the sort of question you ask *before* a heist, not during it,” Virk said.

“But it’s a lot harder for you to lie during the stress of a heist than before it,” Krix smiled back.

Virk didn’t think his companion was being nearly as clever as they assumed, but kept the observation to himself. “Yes, they’ll be worth stealing. My broker has a list of specific tomes his clients are looking for, along with what they’re willing to pay. Securing even *one* would make the heist worthwhile. Ideally, we’ll be snatching a dozen. But that depends on us working fast and not wasting time with irrelevant banter.”

Krix laughed, but didn’t say another word.

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“I wish I could’ve asked them about the taste before they passed out,” Buckle mourned again. His gaze hadn’t left the stuffed students since Virk and Krix had departed, and neither had his thoughts. “I think the pastry hydra could use a little something extra, but I can’t quite put my finger on it. I must have taste-tested it myself a hundred times over, too.”

“Obviously.” Cleave quickly glanced down at Buckle’s middle. He’d never known a doughier thief, aside from a few bombastic drunks well past their prime, who could only steal your time, not your valuables. The cook had only grown fatter since joining the gang. He’d become a liability one day—Cleave swore on it—but Virk always brushed his concerns aside.

“Cleave, would you taste the recipe for me? A fresh perspective sometimes helps.”

“After it blimped those fools up?” Cleave jerked his head derisively towards the students. “I’m not eating a single bite of your damn desserts.”

Buckle’s ears flattened at the rejection. “Maybe Krix will help,” he said, looking away.

Cleave didn’t want to deal with Buckle while he moped. “I’m gonna

patrol the area,” he grunted. Buckle didn’t protest.

Libraries and tomes were of no interest to Cleave. Half the words on the spines of the books made no sense to him and their contents offered him nothing of value. Knowing more about history or magic wouldn’t help him win a fight. His time was better spent training his body or playing games.

Wandering aimlessly, Cleave came upon an aisle of bookcases secured with metal grates, like cabinets. Rather than tomes, they held a cluttered mixture of scrolls, boxes, and trinkets. Most of it looked like it belonged in a junk shop. He guessed even libraries managed to collect trash.

He tried one of the grates, and it creaked open. Apparently nothing within was worth securing. Thick layers of dust covered the shelf’s contents. No one would miss anything so neglected. His eyes settled on a small wooden box with a circle carved on the top. He lifted the lid. A long, curved fang sat within. A hole had been carved into the base and a cord run through it, so that it could be worn as a necklace. The cord was frayed at the ends, as if it’d been cut in the past.

Cleave plucked the fang from the box to get a closer look. A faint chill passed through him, which he shrugged off. The fang hadn’t been carved or adorned in any way. It reminded him of the shark fangs some sailors wore around their necks. He respected those far more than the silver trinkets Krix liked to cover himself in.

He turned the fang over in his fingers. It didn’t look particularly valuable, and obviously no one had come looking for it in a long, long while. At least he could put it to use, rather than let it gather dust in a forgotten aisle of the library. Virk wouldn’t approve, but he didn’t need to know. Cleave pocketed the necklace and shut the box, then the grate. He hurried back to Buckle and boredom.

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The Cracked Coin tavern stood along a narrow, hilly street near the docks of Vastport. There were bigger and better-known taverns and inns nearby, but the Cracked Coin had endured with a reputation of being merely acceptable. Mediocracy provided Virk and his gang with ample cover. To the public, they



simply ran a forgettable tavern. They didn't worry about the city guard taking a closer look and could coast on the income of the tavern between heists.

The tavern closed on heist nights, so the gang celebrated their success in peace.

Virk raised his mug of ale. "Yet again we've proven ourselves to be the best thieves in the entire city. In and out of the Academy unseen with twelve rare tomes. After I hand them over to my broker tomorrow, we'll have enough money to spend the next few weeks doing absolutely nothing."

Krix and Buckle toasted to that, while Cleave scoffed. "Sitting around all day is boring. We'll all get as fat as Buckle if we're lazy."

"Only if you glut," Virk said. "And gorging in a tavern is better than starving in a dungeon. A good thief understands the importance of moderation." Multiple eyes drifted to Buckle's middle. "The more robberies we commit, the greater our chances of getting caught. So instead of just snatching every damn thing that catches our eye, we choose our targets carefully and space our heists out."

"It's a crafty approach, Virk, it really is," Krix said. "But what's the harm in having a little extra fun? Send me to a party, and I can steal both the hearts and the riches of everyone there."

"Or they'll steal your freedom and put you in shackles when they hear the treasures rattling in your pockets," Virk replied. "We've rescued you from a cell once before, but I'm not certain we'd bother doing it again."

"But it was such a delightful adventure!" Buckle said. He pulled a tiny marble of dough from his pouch and transformed it into a plump pastry cow. "The guards were so entranced by my herd of treats and praised the taste." The pastry cow trotted towards Krix, who gladly gobbled it up.

"We're not in it for the adventure, Buckle, we're in it for the money," Virk insisted.

Cleave ignored the ensuing argument and slipped a claw into his pocket, feeling the necklace. He pulled it out but kept it below the edge of the table, admiring it in secret.

"What's that?" Krix asked.

Cleave looked up in surprise. He pulled his claw away but felt the necklace slip between two fingers. Krix had deftly snatched it from his grasp.

“Give that back!” Cleave growled. He swiped at Krix, but the other kobold easily dodged him.

Krix held the necklace up for all to see. “I thought you loathed jewelry?”

“Only the gaudy shit you cover yourself in!”

“But a tooth is fine?” Krix smirked. He tossed the necklace to Buckle when Cleave tried to rescue it again.

Buckle only had a few seconds with the necklace before Virk snatched it out of his claws. “Cleave, you better not have stolen this from the library,” Virk hissed. His tail flicked behind him.

Cleave instinctively looked away. A few bad lies cycled through his head before he blurted out one that felt passable. “I yanked it from one of the students.”

The lie didn’t soothe Virk’s fury. “You fool, now they’ll be snooping around for anything else we might have stolen!”

“It’s just a stupid necklace!” Cleave almost wished he’d told the truth. Instead, he recklessly added to the lie. “It’s not like he was awake or anything when I nabbed it. It snapped off his neck when Buckle’s pastry stuffed him.”

“If it fell off while the student was getting fed, then he’ll probably assume another student pocketed it before he could return,” Krix said. “He’ll be far too concerned about how fat he’s gotten to fret about a silly necklace.”

“Yeah,” Cleave grumbled through clenched teeth. He was still annoyed that Krix had brought the necklace to Virk’s attention, but at least they were backing him up.

Virk looked between Krix and Cleave and scowled. “You’d better hope that’s the case.” He threw the necklace back to Cleave. “Thank the gods you didn’t steal anything of real value.”

Cleave snarled. He tied a knot in the two frayed ends of the cord and put the necklace on. It hung loose, but it’d likely been intended for someone larger than a kobold. He rubbed the fang between two fingers, proud of the treasure he’d stolen on his own. Perhaps it’d become his good luck charm.